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ABSTRACT

Each year, many teachers face the problem of where to place children who do not fit into the rest of the class. Retention is an option that is frequently considered for these children. Children considered for retention often have poor academic skills, are small in stature or the youngest in the grade, have moved or been absent frequently, do poorly on a prescreening assessment, or have limited English-language skills. In addition, retained children are more likely to be male and to have minority status, a high activity level, low socioeconomic status, and parents who are unwilling or unable to intercede for them. However, research indicates that although some retained students do better at first, these children often fall behind again in later grades; most children do not "catch up" when held back; and students who are held back tend to get into trouble, dislike school, and feel badly about themselves more often than children who go on to the next grade. Some alternatives to retention include mixed-age classes, individualized instruction, tutoring, home assistance programs, smaller class size, alternative educational settings, guidance counseling, and delay of achievement testing. When parents are faced with retention as an option for their child, they can make an effort to understand why the teacher is suggesting retention; keep the teacher informed about the parents' knowledge of the child; be aware of the stresses that may be affecting the child and keep the teacher informed; ask the child about homework and give him or her a quiet place to study; be certain that the child eats nutritious meals, gets enough sleep, and stays healthy; and request assistance from other support staff in the school. Retention should be used rarely, and new approaches to curriculum development, school restructuring, and student instruction should become the focus of academic improvement. (LPP)

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When Retention Is Recommended, What Should Parents Do?

Anne S. Robertson

Each year, many teachers face the problem of where and how to place children who do not seem to fit into the rest of the class. In many school districts, retention, or having the child repeat a grade, is an option that is frequently considered for children who appear to lag behind. It is estimated that every year, 2.4 million students are retained in grade for a variety of reasons (Setencich, 1994, p. 4).

Characteristics of Children Who May Be Retained

A child may be considered for retention if he or she has poor academic skills, is small in stature or the youngest in the grade, has moved or been absent frequently, does poorly on a prescreening assessment, or has limited English-language skills. In addition, a retained child is more likely to be male and to have minority status, a high activity level, low socioeconomic status, and parents who are unwilling or unable to intercede for the child. Retention is also more commonly used in the primary grades (Sakowicz, 1996, pp. 17-18). In a few cases, the teacher may feel that the child is capable of moving forward, but the parent may prefer that the child be retained. Since most schools have vague policies regarding retention, the decision typically falls to the classroom teacher (Sakowicz, 1996, p. 7).

Effects of Retention

Research from the Gesell Institute suggests that children benefit from careful developmental assessment and placement in the early grades (Keirns, 1991). Some teachers and parents believe that appropriate placement encompasses retention and that certain children will benefit from the maturity gained from an extra year in the same grade. However, cumulative research on the effects of retention shows that the negative effects usually outweigh the positive effects. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, n.d.) notes the following among the negative effects:

- Most children do not "catch up" when held back.
- Although some retained students do better at first, these children often fall behind again in later grades.
- Students who are held back tend to get into trouble, dislike school, and feel badly about themselves more often than children who go on to the next grade.

In addition to the conclusions that NASP has drawn from the research, the weakened self-esteem that usually accompanies retention plays a role in how well the child may cope in the future. Research has shown that children view the thought of flunking a grade to be almost as stressful as the death of a parent or blindness (Sevener, 1990, p. 2). "Even more staggering is the fact that being held back twice makes dropping out of school a virtual certainty" (Setencich, 1994, p. 7).

Why Do Schools Retain Children?

In view of the larger body of research on retention, the continued use of retention is one of the clearest examples of poor communication between research and practice (Sakowicz, 1996, p. 16).

Professors Smith and Shepard at the University of Colorado found that teachers frequently exaggerated the perceived benefits of retention. They believed that retention in early grades prevented problems or the stigma of failure later on. But teachers lacked real feedback on how well students were doing as they moved through school (Smith & Shepard, 1987, p. 130). Also, the practice of retention gives the appearance of a school's being accountable about a problem and enforcing standards but may neglect the underlying cause of a student's failure (Sakowicz, 1996, p. 16).

There are also some philosophical differences among professional educators. Some teachers believe that children mature and develop school readiness along with physiological unfolding, while other teachers believe that any child of legal age is teachable if the program is adapted to fit that child's individual needs. In one study, the teachers who leaned toward physiological readiness also leaned towards retention, while the other teachers were more likely to change their teaching methods to meet the individual child's needs (Cooke & Stammer, 1985).

Options Other Than Retention

Another difficulty for a teacher or parent, as he or she assesses the possibilities for the child, is the basic dilemma of choosing from the options that are available in their school or community. It is important for parents and teachers to become aware of some of the alternatives to retention. These include:

- *Mixed-age classes.* In this environment, students learn at their own rate and advance to the next stage when they have mastered the required skills without the restriction of grade-level labeling.
- *Individualized instruction.* This method is tailored to the individual student's style of learning.
- *Tutoring.* Through individual attention, students are helped in difficult academic areas throughout the year.
- *Home assistance programs.* These programs provide parents with structured specific information about ways

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to help their child academically with homework, sound study habits, or sound work habits.

- *Smaller class size.* Particularly in the primary years, small class size improves learning environments for all students.
- *Seeking alternative educational settings.* These may include summer school or after-school programs that are learning laboratories with lots of opportunities for projects and a "hands on" approach to learning.
- *Guidance counseling.* In an advisor/advisee type of relationship, an "at-risk" student may be identified earlier and given consistent support throughout his or her school career.
- *Delaying achievement testing that may lead to retention.* Achievement testing may be useful for identifying weak areas in the school curriculum and possibly areas where the child needs additional support; however, it should not be taken out of context of other information and become the deciding factor for grade placement for a child.

How Parents Can Respond

When parents are faced with retention as an option for their child, they can:

- Make an effort to understand why the teacher is suggesting retention. Parents can ask to see examples of their child's work compared to the work of other children of the same age. If the teacher is concerned about the child's maturity or behavior, parents can ask for specific examples of behavior that cause concern.
- Keep the teacher informed about the parents' knowledge of the child. If the child was within the normal ranges of early developmental benchmarks, parents can let the teacher know. How does the child's school behavior compare with his or her at-home behavior? Are there similarities or large differences?
- Be aware of the stresses that may be affecting the child and keep the teacher informed. For example, if the family has a new baby in the house, or has recently moved, these life changes can affect the child's behavior for a short period of time.
- At home, ask the child about homework and give him or her a quiet place to study.
- Be certain that the child eats nutritious meals, gets enough sleep, and stays healthy.
- Request assistance from other support staff in the school. The school psychologist, school counselor, or special education staff may be able to evaluate the child and suggest an alternative intervention.

However, if the parents and teachers believe that retention is the best option, the National Association of School Psychologists (1988) notes that retention is not as likely to be harmful when the student:

- lacks serious deficits in the year prior to retention;
- has positive self-esteem and good social skills;
- shows signs of difficulty in school because of lack of opportunity for instruction rather than lack of ability; or
- does not have serious social, emotional, or behavioral deficits.

If a child repeats a grade, parents should work with school personnel to be sure that their child has a significantly different experience during the retained year from the previous year and that the child is assessed and placed at the appropriate developmental level. Some options might include a classroom with a lower teacher–student ratio, a different curriculum, or a different approach to learning. It might also be beneficial to move the child to another school. If retention is chosen, then the extra year should not be just a repetition of the previous year, but it should be individualized in such a way that it contributes to the child's future success.

Conclusion

Early intervention or identification of specific difficulties can assist the child with specific skills he or she may need to be successful in his or her school career. Retention should be used rarely, and new approaches to curriculum development, school restructuring, and student instruction should become the focus of academic improvement (Meisels & Liaw, 1993).

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